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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

30 April 1985

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: USSR-North Korea: Prospects for Military Cooperation

Summary

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[redacted]
[redacted] Moscow and P'yongyang initialed a military agreement during Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Kapitsa's November 1984 visit that may provide North Korea with an advanced version of the MIG-21. [redacted]

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[redacted] the recent warming of Soviet-North Korean political ties and other regional military and political developments, indicates a high probability of increased Soviet-North Korean military cooperation over the next two or three years. This may involve routine coordinated intelligence operations and a Soviet supply of new weapons

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Third World Activities Division, Office of Soviet Analysis with a contribution by [redacted] SOVA/TWA/T. It was coordinated with the Office of East Asian Analysis and the Office of Global Issues. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Third World Activities, SOVA [redacted]

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systems such as air defense missiles and a limited number of advanced aircraft. [redacted]

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We believe, however, that P'yongyang will avoid granting base access rights out of concern that such a move would be too great a concession of sovereignty to Moscow. We also think it likely that the Soviets will shun moves that run a high risk of scuttling an increasingly promising dialogue with Beijing or stimulating increased cooperation on security issues between the US and Asian states. [redacted]

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The Political Context

There has been a noticeable warming of Soviet-North Korean political relations over the past two years, while Sino-North Korean ties show some signs of tension. The mutually supportive handling of the KAL shootdown and Rangoon bombing by P'yongyang and Moscow in late 1983 reflected a new measure of common political ground in their relationship. Last summer Kim Il-song used his journey to the USSR and East Europe to demonstrate to Beijing and the rest of the world that P'yongyang had friends west as well as east of the Urals. [redacted]

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Meetings between the Soviet and North Korean foreign ministers in New York and Moscow last fall culminated in a late November trip to P'yongyang by Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Kapitsa, ostensibly to negotiate a border agreement. During his November visit, Kapitsa reportedly promised North Korea a nuclear power plant that Kim had requested in May but which the Soviets earlier had been reluctant to offer. He also met the younger Kim--which was publicized in the Soviet as well as North Korean press--and invited him to visit Moscow. [redacted]

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Meanwhile, P'yongyang's announcements of preparations for the August 1985 fortieth anniversary celebrations of Korea's liberation from Japanese rule have favorably portrayed Moscow's role in the liberation and Soviet reconstruction assistance to underscore the importance it attaches to warm relations. Early this month, P'yongyang moved to strengthen the heir apparent's association with closer ties to Moscow by having both Kims receive a visiting high-level Soviet party delegation. The media in both countries described the talks in positive terms. [redacted]

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Closer Military Ties

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[redacted] In late February, the Soviets also undertook a salvage and rescue operation for a North Korean diesel submarine that sank off North Korea's east coast. Moscow may have calculated that its demonstrated willingness to render prompt naval assistance during a military accident would give a further boost to already warming ties. [redacted]

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Moscow and P'yongyang also initialed a new military agreement during the Kapitsa visit in November [redacted]

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[redacted] By comparison, the Soviets had remained deliberately noncommittal during the elder Kim's visit to Moscow in May. [redacted]

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Over the past decade the Soviets have provided the North with the technology to manufacture weapons systems already in its inventory as well as new ones--including T-62 tanks, AT-3 antitank missiles, and SA-7 surface-to-air missiles--but Moscow has not delivered a finished major weapons system to North Korea since 1974. A Soviet commitment to transfer a new system and possibly relevant production technology might represent a quid pro quo in exchange for permission to conduct intelligence flights. Even barring other forms of reimbursement by P'yongyang, both the age of the MIG-21 aircraft and their ready availability in Moscow's inventory probably make them a low-cost form of military assistance for the Soviets and one regarded as having a potentially large political payoff. [redacted]

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Catalysts for Further Military Cooperation

We anticipate that several developments either projected or already underway may further encourage Moscow to provide P'yongyang with new military assistance.

- The most important is the US basing of F-16s at Misawa air base in northern Japan since early April, despite Moscow's sustained propaganda campaign against the deployment. Judging by the Soviet response to INF deployments in Western Europe, we believe there is a good chance the Soviets will now look to "analogous" military countermeasures to maintain their credibility in the region.
- As the 1986 target date for the scheduled procurement of US F-16s by South Korea draws near, P'yongyang almost certainly will intensify its quest for advanced weaponry. For political reasons the Soviets almost certainly will feel compelled to demonstrate their ability to take steps to offset US moves and assert their influence over events on the peninsula.
- Increased Soviet concern over Sino-US military cooperation, possibly triggered by US naval port calls, may lead Moscow to actively pursue closer military ties to the North regardless of the negative reaction this could elicit from the Chinese.
- P'yongyang, for its part, may interpret the growth of a Sino-US military relationship as "proof" that Beijing is subordinating its traditional friendship with P'yongyang to other foreign policy goals. [redacted]

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Prospects

At a minimum, P'yongyang probably will receive one or more of the items on its shopping list, such as air defense missiles, modern armor and anti-armor weapons, or advanced MIG-21s. They might also receive one to two squadrons of MIG-23s or MIG-25s without the most advanced Soviet avionics or armaments. Deliveries may be timed to coincide with the August 1985 fortieth anniversary celebrations of Korea's liberation from the Japanese, given P'yongyang's decision to highlight the Soviet contribution and, according to reports making the rounds in P'yongyang's diplomatic community, Moscow's expressed willingness to send a MIG-23 squadron for an air display during the celebrations. [redacted]

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[redacted] diplomatic reporting of Kapitsa's comments on his P'yongyang visit indicate that some intelligence sharing is already underway. Increased public backing by P'yongyang on major international political issues may also follow. The Soviets probably will try to score propaganda points by depicting deliveries of a small number of advanced aircraft as "evidence" of Moscow's ability and determination to respond militarily to US deployments and sales in northeast Asia. We believe, however, that the Soviets almost certainly will carefully calibrate the size and the quality of their offerings in order to avoid

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dramatically upsetting the regional military balance or encouraging the North to attack the South. []

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This option probably would not seriously threaten either Soviet or North Korean relations with Beijing. []

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In view of the catalysts already in train--for example, deployments of F-16s to Japan, the sale of F-16s to South Korea, and the progress in Sino-US military cooperation--we rate the chances of expanded Soviet military exchanges with P'yongyang better than even. We also judge that each side perceives clear benefits from such expanded--but still limited--exchanges. []

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P'yongyang's Calculus

The acquisition of an advanced version of the MIG-21 that Moscow has reportedly agreed to provide would give the North a more powerful and reliable aircraft than those now in North Korea's fighter force. It might also eventually enable P'yongyang to upgrade the domestic version of the Chinese model F-7 slated for production starting this year. []

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In addition, the MIG-23 fighter/bomber that Pyongyang has also sought to acquire since the mid-1970s is a more advanced aircraft than the planes the North already has in its inventory. Depending on the numbers involved and the avionics and armaments Moscow provides, Soviet deliveries of advanced aircraft--in conjunction with projected North Korean domestic fighter production--might affect the air balance on the peninsula. Gains in South Korea's current quality advantage, as projected under Seoul's aircraft improvement program, would be at least partially offset by a significant number of North Korean fighter acquisitions from the USSR. []

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P'yongyang has other military needs that the Soviets can fill. Moscow could provide equipment--missile systems and associated radars--to upgrade the North's ground-based air defenses. North Korea's growing mechanized and armor forces have created a need for mobile, battlefield air defense systems, which the Soviets previously have been unwilling to supply. P'yongyang's shopping list probably also includes modern armor and antiarmor weapons. Following long-established practices, North Korea would seek not only equipment but also the technology required for domestic manufacture. []

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Moscow's Calculus

The Soviets probably envisage a variety of advantages to developing the kind of military relationship with P'yongyang described above.

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- An agreement to provide a restricted number and variety of military items on P'yongyang's shopping list, such as the one reportedly initialed last November, probably is regarded as useful in building political influence to offset Sino-North Korean ties.
- The Soviets may value closer military ties as a guarantee of Moscow's right to participate in any decisions affecting the peninsula's future.

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Less Likely Alternatives

We judge that Moscow probably will probe for some form of Soviet military access to North Korea--for example, port calls or intelligence flights staged from the North--but that North Korean resistance makes agreement along these lines considerably less likely than a more restricted military relationship. North Korea's proximity to Soviet territory in a region where Moscow has already concentrated substantial military resources probably renders it less significant as a potential asset for Soviet power projection than the other, more far-flung areas where Moscow has sought access. The Soviets may judge that neither the military nor the political benefits of closer military ties are worth the price North Korea almost certainly would demand in terms of weapons systems and production technology. Apart from military access that P'yongyang is unlikely to grant, the North has no means to repay new Soviet military assistance that goes beyond very limited weapons transfers. Additionally, the Soviets may be concerned that signs of even limited military access to the North would encourage Beijing to broaden rather than reduce its cooperation with the US on security issues in the region. Despite the recent warming of political relations, the Soviets probably remain wary of the elder Kim's erratic and unpredictable behavior in foreign policy and are concerned that they might get sucked into an armed conflict on the peninsula over which they would have no control. For its part, P'yongyang almost certainly would want to avoid any moves that might invite Chinese economic retaliation or that might accelerate South Korea's military procurement program.

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A full-blown Soviet-North Korean military alliance remains even less probable in our view. We judge that both the USSR and North Korea probably will shun such an alliance as too costly.

- Moves in such a direction almost certainly would provide a major impetus for increased multilateral military cooperation involving the US, China, Japan, and South Korea and aimed against the USSR.

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- China might deploy forces opposite North Korea for political intimidation.
- Most importantly, a full-blown alliance would involve a concession of sovereignty that the North has consistently rejected over the past four decades. [REDACTED]

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These considerations make it unlikely that either side will strive for a very close military relationship. The Soviets, meanwhile, may reason that current Sino-North Korean tensions and P'yongyang's commitment to its own brand of triangular diplomacy on the peninsula probably require no more than limited Soviet military offers to elicit a favorable response from the North. Moscow may also calculate that recurring rumors of major new Soviet-North Korean military exchanges can serve an important purpose, reminding other actors in the region of a Soviet determination to play an active role in shaping the peninsula's political future. [REDACTED]

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Implications for US and Allies

The potential impact on US interests of Soviet-North Korean military exchanges on this scale would appear to be mixed. Soviet arms transfers, if restricted in scope and quality, would have only limited propaganda value in Asia and no major military significance for the regional military balance. Intelligence sharing or coordinated intelligence missions, however, probably would improve Soviet military capabilities, either through increases in on-station time available to Soviet collectors or through military information gleaned from North Korean COMINT and SIGINT operations. Any enhancement of North Korean collection capabilities with Soviet aid or equipment, and intelligence passed from Moscow to P'yongyang, would increase the North's ability to monitor US and ROK forces and might assist the North in taking steps to reduce the tactical warning time available to the South in the event of a planned attack. [REDACTED]

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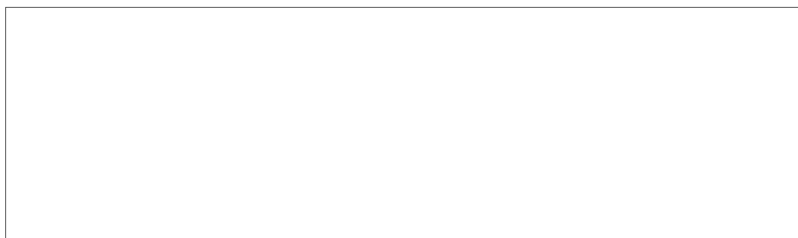
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